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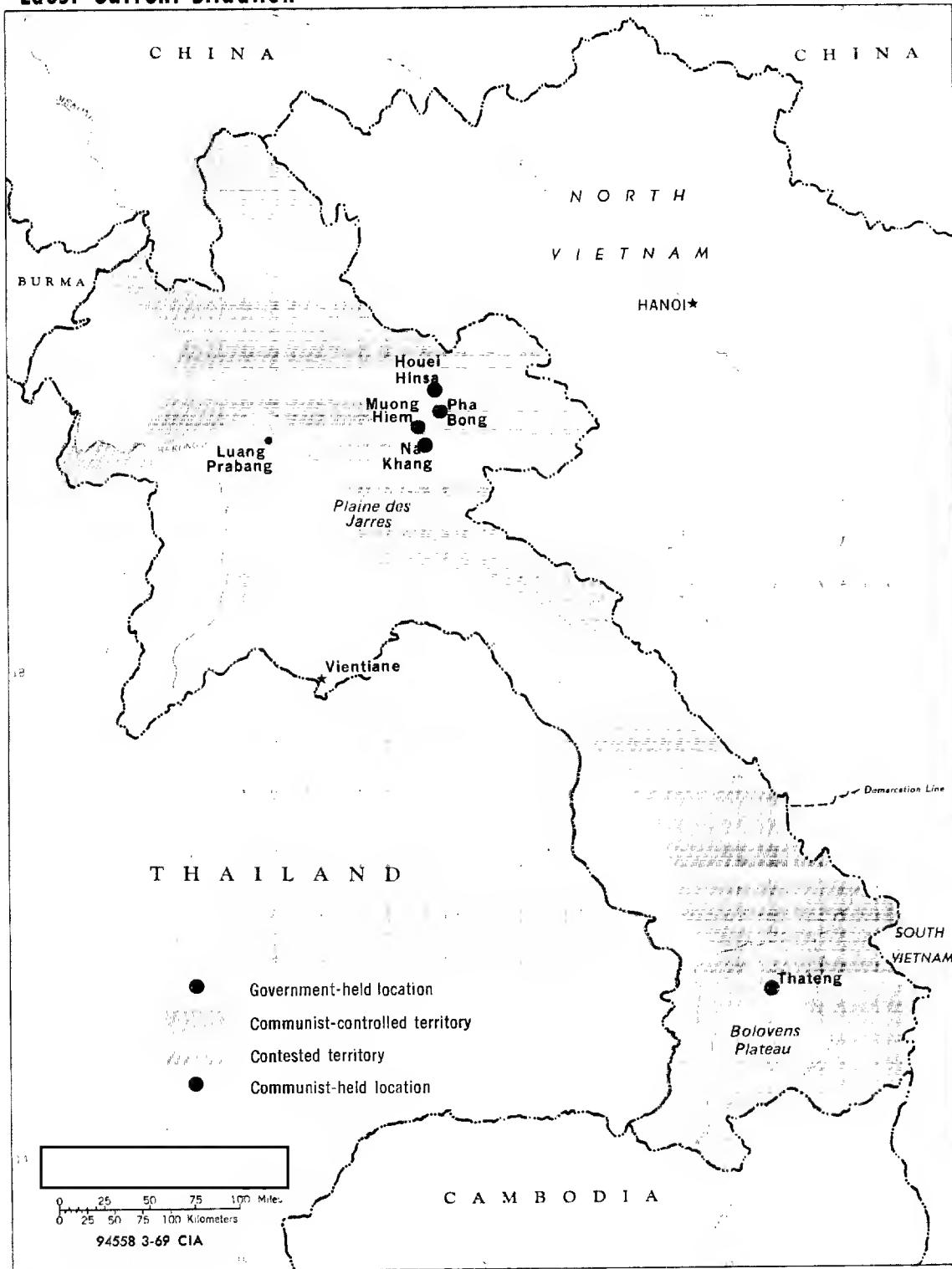
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Laos: Current Situation



Laos: The Communists are moving against other government positions in the northeast following the capture of Na Khang.

In the area north of Na Khang, North Vietnamese troops have moved back into Houei Hinsa, a guerrilla stronghold captured during the government's summer offensive last year. There are also reports of an increased enemy threat against the bases at Muong Hiem and Pha Bong. Farther south, Pathet Lao forces have overrun a small outpost just north of the Plaine des Jarres, and now threaten other positions in the immediate area. Government military leaders hope to use these positions to anchor a new defensive line.

Efforts to blunt the North Vietnamese are being seriously hampered by large numbers of tribal refugees who are flocking into the bases still under government control. In addition, government personnel and equipment losses in the recent fighting appear to be very high.

The unhappy turn of events has also cast a pall over the leadership in Vientiane. Prime Minister Souvanna interprets the attack against Na Khang as evidence that the Soviet ambassador's recent trip to Hanoi and the Pathet Lao's upcountry headquarters has not had a restraining influence on the Communists. Souvanna had hoped that the trip would result in some lessening in the fighting and would generate some movement toward early talks between the contending factions.

Souvanna also fears that the North Vietnamese will exploit their recent gains by moving southward into an area between Vientiane and Luang Prabang from which they were driven several years ago. He has asked the US to provide additional equipment for the army.

In south Laos, meanwhile, Communist forces have been applying new pressure against government

positions west of the Bolovens Plateau. The effort may be designed to force the government to strengthen its thinly stretched forces in the Mekong Valley by withdrawing assets committed to the defense of Thateng. Although North Vietnamese troops are still dug-in around the base, heavy air strikes have prevented them from launching new ground assaults in the three-month-old struggle.

(Map)

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